DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 446 393 EA 030 699

AUTHOR Cuffaro, Harriet K.
TITLE Educational Standards in a Democratic Society: Questioning Process and Consequences. Occasional Paper #4.
INSTITUTION Sarah Lawrence Coll., Bronxville, NY. Child Development Inst.
PUB DATE 2000-07-10
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the 2000 Empowering Teachers Summer Institute, "Rethinking Standards and Assessment" (Bronxville, NY, July 10, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; Alternative Assessment; Child Development; *Community Coordination; *Democracy; Elementary Education; Evaluation; *Standardized Tests
IDENTIFIERS *Dewey (John)

ABSTRACT

Calls for school reform and performance have crested and receded many times this century. Establishing rigorous academic standards will revolutionize education and improve equity, and standards enjoy popular support. Standards require: (1) proficiency by students of all grades in a variety of subjects; (2) assessment testing; and (3) cooperation with textbook publishers. Much current criticism of standards focuses on the relationship between democracy and education. Dewey's broad, dynamic understanding of this relationship in a lived democracy included developing a shared common purpose through communication, but current discussions too often exclude the experiences of teachers. Many critics and supporters believe current standards are too precise and do not ensure student understanding. Frequently overlooked are the substantial limitations of standardized tests, which ignore factors outside school. The potential of alternative assessment instruments is demonstrated by the experience of a first-grade teacher in New York City's Lower East Side school linking democracy and instruction by focusing on specific skills students need in diverse settings. (TEJ)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 446 393

Child Development Institute

Sarah Lawrence College

occasional paper # 4

Fall, 2000

Educational Standards in a Democratic Society: Questioning Process and Consequences

Harriet K. Cuffaro

EA 030699

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Educational standards in a democratic society: Questioning process and consequences

Harriet K. Cuffaro

The 2000 *Empowering Teachers* Summer Institute
"Rethinking Standards and Assessment"

Sarah Lawrence College
Child Development Institute

July 10, 2000

Preparing a presentation can be difficult and unsettling. It requires much thinking, reading, reflecting, organizing thoughts, and seeking the words that will engage and hold the interest of the listener. It is a rather solitary task but its end is social – to communicate. What begins as a conversation within self becomes a sharing of ideas with others. I confess that this presentation has been particularly difficult and unsettling and it took a while to understand why.

I began with: "Well, what experiences can I call on to inform my thinking about standards?" Thinking about standards and my experiences as a teacher, I was having difficulty making personal connections. Yes, as a classroom teacher, I had dealt with curriculum guidelines, the expectations of principals and parents, rules and requirements, and supervisory visits. Still, in my thinking I was not making meaningful connections to the topic of the presentation. As I procrastinated further in writing this talk, by reading more articles, I realized that it was more than the topic of standards that was causing my difficulty. What was surfacing was my increasing frustration with the field that has been my life's work for so many years – a frustration rooted in the ever-recurring cyclical call to arms in education. I refer to the repeated search for solutions to society's problems through education, as well as blaming education for the nation's problems. I have worked in, and with, a variety of calls to make our world better through education: Sputnik, the War on Poverty, Competency Based Teacher Education, A Nation at Risk, Technology, to name just a few. As I reviewed each decade and its mission and promises, I remembered an essay from which I would like to quote.

"Consider the wave by which a new study is introduced into the curriculum. Someone feels that the school system ... is falling behind the times. There are rumors of great progress in education making elsewhere. Something new and important has been introduced; education is being revolutionized by it; the school superintendent, or members of the board of education, become somewhat uneasy; ... letters are written to the newspapers; editorials appear; finally the school board ordains that on and after a certain date the particular (study) ... shall be taught in the public schools. The victory is won and everybody – unless it be some already over-burdened and distracted teacher – congratulates everybody else that such advanced steps are taken.

The next year, or possibly the next month, there comes an outcry that children do not write or spell or figure as well as they used to; that they cannot do the necessary work in the upper grades or in the high school because of lack of ready command of the necessary tools of study. We are told that they are not prepared for business because their spelling is so poor, their work in addition and multiplication so slow and inaccurate... Some zealous soul on the school board takes up *this* matter; the newspapers are again heard from; investigations are set on foot, and the edict goes forth that there must be more drill in the fundamentals of writing, spelling, and number." (Dewey, 1976,1901,263)

There is nothing new or startling in what I have just read, other than to note that it was written at the beginning of the 20th century, in 1901, by John Dewey. What is remarkable is that the script remains constant one hundred years later. To bring Dewey's story into the 21st century, to our everyday, requires only a few changes in the script: the addition of corporations, competition in the global market, state regulations, Congressional committees, and national elections.

In the past decade it has become increasingly clear that what will now revolutionize and reform American education, and lift the spirit of the nation and its standing throughout the world, is the establishment of rigorous educational standards. Raising our educational standards has become synonymous with the attainment of excellence. It has also been claimed that through the setting of rigorous standards we will also achieve equity in education. The call for standards has been heeded in every state and applauded by corporations, foundations, and business leaders. The persuasive, positive rhetoric on standards, and the powerful interests supporting its claims, resonate with the first of the twenty-nine definitions of "standard" in the Oxford dictionary.

> "A flag or sculptured figure or other conspicuous object raised on a pole to indicate the rallying point of an army or fleet; usually the king's standard."

What do we mean by standards? It is a word that has multiple meanings and usage. For example, when the government sets a standard to be followed by car manufacturers, or in relation to air pollution, "standard" usually refers to the

minimum required to meet specifications. "Standard" can also mean that which defines the attainment of excellence in some field, as one might say that Shakespeare set the standard for the writing of sonnets. Through these examples, it appears that, depending on the context, standard may refer to either the exemplary or the minimal. How do we connect standards with education? In the Oxford dictionary's twenty-nine definitions for the word, only one, the 12th, refers specifically to education.

> "In British elementary schools: each of the recognized degrees of proficiency, as tested by examination, according to which children are classified."

The key words here are proficiency, tested by examination, and classified. To Americanize the definition and connect its usage to the current standards movement, I would say, in general: standards are an elaborated listing of what students are expected to know, and to do, at each grade level in various subjects, such as, language arts, social studies, math, science. Whether children have attained the goals set in the standards is determined through the use of assessment tools/tests. As Vito Perrone (1997) succinctly stated,"We come to an agreement on what students should know, getting all that up front; then we teach what we have agreed they should know; then we give a test on the precise knowledge we have taught them" (5). As we teach to the standards, the curriculum also requires textbooks, means to reach the stated goals. The presence of textbooks introduces additional active participants in the standards movement: the textbook publishers

who are also, in many instances, the developers of tests and assessment tools. And, as I learned recently, textbook publishers are also doing staff development workshops in the schools.

Standards are always present whether or not they are stated explicitly. Standards are the expectations that surround us – in school, at home, in public places. They are an intrinsic part of the social context in which we function. They cue our behavior, affect our interactions, and shape our body language. They are part of our socialization into the various cultures to which each of us belongs. The existence of standards in education is not new, nor is the presence of testing in schools. Remembering our own experiences as public school students would confirm the reality of their existence over the decades. Looking at the educational scene now, not as students but as teachers, are there issues to which we should be giving our attention? I use the word <u>should</u> because education is intentional; it has a purpose. It involves choices and values. It has aims. But, as Dewey (1966) noted, "... (I)t is well to remind ourselves that education as such has no aims. Only persons, parents, and teachers ... have aims, not an abstract idea like education" (107). Since aims come from the hearts and minds of people, they will reflect our personal choices and values. Our educational aims will reveal what knowledge we prize; and our aims also will reveal how that knowledge will be acquired. While addressing the child's present learning, our aims also speak to the future, to what we hope the child will be and become. Often, our aims also include our vision of the preferred society in which we hope the child shall live.

With these thoughts in mind, I return to the earlier Perrone quote, when he said, "We come to an agreement on what students should know, ... then we teach what we have agreed they should know..." Who are all these WE? Who is answering the educator's fundamental question which is "What is worth knowing?" More often than not, the "we" are distant committees and experts, people who are not in the schools experiencing the daily life of the classroom. I note this with exasperation because in the discussions that followed the 1983 Nation at Risk report – the report that was the spark that fueled the current standards movement and reforms – there was much hand-wringing and upset when it was realized that there were no teachers on the committee writing the report. Neither were there parents or students. In response, Marion Wright Edelman held hearings throughout the country inviting the missing voices to be heard. In the spirit of *mea culpa*, the Harvard Ed Review instituted its "Teachers and Teaching" column. And at a symposium discussing the various reports of the 1983-84 years, while noting the absence of teachers' voices, Eleanor Duckworth (1984) extended her observation, adding,

> "Teachers' voices are absent from educational discourse in general... The assumption seems to be that teachers are a kind of civil servant, to be "trained" by those who know better, to carry out the job as they are directed to do, to be assessed managerially, to be understood through third party studies." (17)

Most recently, increasingly sharp criticisms of the standards have surfaced. It is interesting that much of the criticism of the standards has focused on the

relationship between democracy and education. This is not surprising because it is in our public schools that we are taught the knowledge, skills, and attitudes our society prizes. It is in school that we are tutored in the meaning of citizenship. If we are to connect democracy and education, to what should we give our attention? What attitudes and actions should we encourage in school? In what direction shall we guide development? What must be understood if democracy is to be more than words? How can fundamentals of democracy be learned in school so that they have genuine meaning for the learner? To think about these questions I do not turn to dictionaries but to John Dewey who found an intrinsic and dynamic relationship between democracy and education (Cuffaro, 1995).

For Dewey, democracy is not limited to, or to be found primarily in, institutions, government, or the act of voting. For Dewey (1991,1939) democracy is all pervasive; it is a "way of life." Democracy is lived in community, where there is a welcoming of individuality and diversity, where there is inclusion rather than exclusion, and where the active participation of each person is encouraged. Democracy is "primarily a mode of associated living," of shared communication. People do not become a community simply because of physical closeness. Community comes into being when people are conscious of sharing a common end, a common purpose, in which they are so invested that they then regulate their individual actions with that end in view (Dewey,1966). Community, like democracy, is not fixed or static; it is not a finished product but vital and dynamic. The common, the shared, is not a continuation of the present unchanged.

While there are the constants of core values which are the heart of the community, change also occurs through the presence of new perspectives and vision introduced by people working individually and collectively.

The commonality of purpose necessary to the creation of community requires communication. As Dewey (1966) reminds us, "Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession" (9). It is in discussion, in conversation, in the exchange of ideas, in the sharing of our thoughts and feelings, that community achieves its strength and meaning. It is in and through language, in the words we speak to each other, that we create and shape our common purpose. To be meaningful, our conversations require a partnership of understanding. That is, as we speak, we also reach outward to think about how the other person hears our words.

From this highlighting of a Deweyan view of democracy, it is understandable that what the critics of the standards movement point to repeatedly is the distant, externally imposed nature of the standards, and in particular, the position in which this places teachers. It is a view that resonates with Duckworth's observation on the position of teachers, quoted earlier. When it is stated that democracy requires communication and shared common purpose, that does not mean among the experts, or committees, but rather, among the participants in the educational undertaking, those whose lives are directly affected by the choices made – teachers, principals, students, families, communities. The marginal position of those who share the daily lives of children in the schools also has an impact on students' understanding of

power, decision making, and responsibility. As Meier (2000) observes, young people "need to witness the exercise of judgement, the weighing of means and ends by people they can imagine becoming, and they need to see how responsible adults handle disagreement" (17).

In addition to questioning the process by which standards have been created, critics also ask: what is the knowledge, the content, contained in the standards? What has been deemed worthy of knowing? Among the language arts and math standards for kindergarten in New York, it is expected that by year's end the student should be able to: "hold books right side up and turn pages in the right direction; understand that letters stand for sounds that make up words; count objects up to ten; explore fraction concepts using the words whole and half; use letters, drawings, scribbles, and gestures to tell a story; draw pictures to draw mathematical situations." These seem reasonable expectations as long as the kindergarten day of five-and six-year-olds is not devoted primarily to the acquisition of these skills, leaving few opportunities for children to pursue their curiosities, or have time to learn through their play. My concern here is with attitudes children may develop about the importance and value of their own questions and interests, what Dewey (1963) called collateral learning, the "formation of enduring attitudes, of likes and dislikes, (that) may be and often is much more important than the spelling lesson or lesson in geography that is learned" (48).

Both critics and supporters of standards have stated that the standards have become much too detailed and precise. Further, in certain curriculum areas such as

social studies, the expectations of what students should master at certain grade levels has evoked surprise, if not astonishment. Some examples follow. At the fourth grade level in New York state, the study begins with the colonial period, then on to the Revolutionary War and nationhood, followed by detailing the development of local and state government in New York state. In Massachusetts, students at the fourth grade level are "responsible for world history to A.D. 500 and U.S. history until 1865" (Nash, 2000, 46). A fourth grade standard for the Wisconsin History/Social Studies Framework is: "Show a basic understanding of the role played by religion and civic values in the history of Wisconsin and the nation and describe how that role is similar to or different from that role in an ancient civilization and feudal society found in Europe or China" (Perrone, 1997, 18). What meaningful connections can nine-year-olds make to the topics I have described? Will they be able to analyze, synthesize, and understand what they are learning? I turn to Dewey again for the distinctions he made among the words knowledge, understanding, and information. Noting that "knowledge to so many people means 'information,'" he cautioned, "There is no guarantee in any amount of information, even if skillfully conveyed, that an intelligent attitude of mind will be formed" or that it will lead to understanding and intelligent action" (1991,1937,11).

Knowledge of development, coupled with the experience of working with nine-year-olds in school, obligates me to question the depth of students' understanding of the complex social studies content of these fourth grade standards. What students may gain is information, the accumulated data needed to answer test

questions, which leads to another major criticism of the standards movement – tests and the consequences for students.

As noted earlier, testing in education is not a new phenomenon. Examinations in relation to secondary education were instituted in Boston in 1845, and secondary school examinations were established by the New York legislature in 1877. (Perrone,1989,149) Regardless of the century or decade, in various ways and in different situations, tests have served to effectively sort, classify, and track students, for example, tests to determine whether a student will follow a vocational or academic program. The present partnership between standards and testing is no exception. We have a phrase to describe the consequences of the present testing – "high stakes testing" – because these tests will determine whether students will be promoted, and also whether they will graduate. Our reliance on standardized tests and the truth and certainty we attribute to them, overlook the detail of the meaning of test results, as well as the limitations of tests. What we cannot overlook, and must not ignore, are the racist and classist consequences of the current wave of standardized testing. Clearly, the stakes are high not only for students but also for a democratic society.

In standardized tests the format of all the questions/items is the same for all students as are the instructions and the time permitted. As has been said, "About the only thing in the arena of standardized testing that is not standardized is the test-taker" (Bracey, 2000, 26). But through the actions we are taking, based on test results, we <u>are</u> standardizing students. What we are saying is: Regardless of who

you are, where you started, what you have experienced, what you know and what you question, what matters to you — this is important. This is what you should know and be able to do. Motivation, personal interest are secondary to test scores. Your test score identifies and classifies you. But, how can any ONE tool or instrument capture and define the complexity of the individual student?

Additionally, what this approach to learning ignores are the many factors outside of the school that influence children's learning and how they will perform on tests. In this nation, we know that many of the children who are poor, who are of color, lack the basic necessities and conditions that support children's growth and learning – and their performance on tests. It is primarily poor, minority children who have not been promoted, and we are already seeing older children from these same groups who are dropping out and not graduating. Is this how we make democracy a way of life, by reinforcing a two tier educational system, and by limiting the future possibilities and employment of students? As a board member in Massachusetts observed, "Right now, we appear to be using education not as the great equalizer, but as the great divider – the institution that prevents those who start farthest behind from ever catching up" (Gratz, 2000, 34). This standard and standardizing approach also limits and contains the students who succeed, as happens when the curriculum becomes test preparation, offering few opportunities for invention and experimentation, for imagining new possibilities, and for what is essential to the health of a democratic society – questioning the given.

To be critical of standardized tests does not mean a rejection of testing or of

accountability. Various forms of alternative assessment exist that are responsive to individuality, that include the qualitative along with the quantitative, and encourage the presence of students' voices. It is just such an instance of students and teacher working and learning together, and of rigorous expectations and ongoing assessment, that I would like to present. I refer to the classroom of Roberta Valentine who teaches first grade at the Lower East Side public school, one of the alternative, small schools in New York City. I have known Roberta for several years and have been inspired by her work with children in social studies. We've had many conversations about the use of unit blocks as a means for children to give form to and express their questions and understanding of the world in which they live. Anecdotal material from her classroom has enriched the content of curriculum courses I've taught.

Each year, Roberta clearly articulates and records the detail of her curriculum, stating her expectations in various curriculum areas. Over the course of the year she records observations of children's work, creating a portfolio that includes photographs of what they have done, plus children's reflections on what they have accomplished. This year, with a technological opportunity created by the Center for Collaborative Education, a grouping of alternative public schools in New York, Roberta has gone on line to detail the curriculum she developed and to demonstrate how she assesses children's learning. Roberta's work joins that of other teachers who are also working in the small, alternative public schools in New York. What is interesting and responsive to concerns about democracy, is that the

teachers' work is public. Teachers can go on line and ask questions, make comments, seek help. What has been created is an opportunity for further communication within a community that shares a common purpose and faith in children. As Roberta said recently, "It's a way for teachers to all work together, to band together. It's to present a united voice and to say there are other ways to assess children, ways that make children come to life. And it's authentic."

I will highlight a few of the social studies activities from the school year just ended, and what I saw on Roberta's laptop. The social studies topic of her curriculum was community workers and jobs and that topic created many opportunities for stretching the children's thinking and perspective. Early in the year each child created a research sheet with a few questions: "Think about the things you'll need in your building. Make a list below. What kinds of jobs? What tools are needed?" Along with trips, guests, and books, these child created sheets became valuable resource tools and were used throughout the year to check information. As the study of community workers progressed, they were asked to write a story about themselves as community workers. Here is one story. "My name is Selina the Firefighter. One day there was a big house. The house was on fire and then a girl from high school, she was at the house. Me, Selina the firefighter put out the fire and the house was not on fire and the high school girl was safe." There were stories also about "Rita the Police Officer," "Felicia the Teacher," "Josh the Police Officer," and "Julian the Social Worker in a Homeless Shelter," (I note here that the children always included a homeless shelter in their

block scheme.) They also created graphs on community workers and using various shaped unit blocks figured out a common scale for illustrating their community worker stories.

The direction of the study changed one day when Roberta mentioned that they lived on an island, Manhattan Island. A child quickly responded, "What do you mean I live on an island? I live on the lower east side." That exchange led to a study of land forms and geography, and discussing how do people live on an island? make money? get food? To explore these questions each child built an island. I pause here to note that while Roberta had a framework of expectations she wanted to meet, her framework was a guide not a detailed itinerary. Curriculum development was a partnership between teacher and children. As the islands were built and interactions developed, further research and writing were needed. This is one child's narrative about his Manhattan Island. "This is Manhattan. It has a police station, fire station, and a subway. It will also have a MacDonald's so that people can buy 'Happy Meals.'" Another child built Robot Island, and via the use of Hyper Studio I was able to see on the computer screen the child's building and the robots he made out of clay. Also on the computer, I saw a child's building, her written report, and then heard her discussing what was happening.

And when the children were at the harbor exploring islandness, looking across the water, they saw the Domino sugar factory. That led to the teacher talking about factory work she had done and several parents came in to talk about the work they are doing. Then the block area became a site of various factories with

attention given to how things are made in sequence. And again, children had discussions about what they were learning, wrote about what they did, and using a variety of materials expressed their understanding in language, number, and art. This work was available on screen, clearly illustrating and demonstrating the children's ability to read, to write, to think mathematically. It also revealed their view of the world in which they live, along with their questions and imagined possibilities.

These children lived the skills they acquired in the context of their use and meaning. They experienced a genuine sense of accomplishment and of learning not because of the existence of external, mandated standards but because interesting, provocative questions had been posed and challenging opportunities offered by teachers who understand children's development, as well as the development of skills and content. In the social atmosphere that had been created, children listened to each other's ideas, were truly interested in the worlds they created, and in their doing imaginatively stretched their thinking beyond the everyday. Without question, what teachers like Roberta do is a lot of hard work. What has interested me in these various schools and classrooms is that with all the work, what I see at year's end, besides expected tiredness, is a sense of pleasure, the kind of satisfaction teachers know and experience when they've been a part of children's growth, that expression that says "Hey, look at what the kids did!"

As I come to ending this talk, I would like to make some connections. One day, as I was reading about authentic assessment, the work of the North Dakota

Study Group, and articles from Rethinking Schools. I suddenly realized that the small, alternative public schools didn't have numbers. They were not like P.S. 94 or P.S. 193 I had attended as a child. These schools had names – The Children's Workshop School, The Lower East Side School, Central Park East. The same was true in other cities with alternative schools. The school's name refers either to a location or to a central focus or idea. Also, similar to many of the independent progressive schools founded in the early decades of the 20th century, these are schools in which the staff come together to talk about their aims, to discuss the why of what is valued, and out of such talk to identify and to create their own standards. These are schools that work to create a sense of community out of the diversity of staff, students, and parents through conversations, discussions, and working together. These schools have developed and named their identity and from that commonality have created a social environment in which their aims and standards, like democracy, would be lived. A school number doesn't stand for something; it does not have a stated identity or focus to guide theory or practice. In such absence, external aims can easily fill the void. Understanding that, asks us to be vigilant, to seek out and challenge policies and practices that close doors and possibilities for children and their future, as well as limit the scope and work of teachers. The future we want for all children cannot be realized through education alone, no matter how high sounding the rhetoric. And let's be clear that it is easier to talk about reforming education, than reforming the economy. It is easier to create rigorous standards for us to follow, than to provide adequate health care and livable housing. And, it is

easier to talk about test scores, than to test our genuine commitment to equal opportunity and equity. And, while being clear minded and political – and education is political – let's also remember how we ourselves restrict and narrow our work by forgetting what we know, as yet another "solution" grabs our attention and we move again into an either-or mentality. We limit ourselves when we think – it's either play or literacy in the kindergarten, when actually it could be: let's look at all the opportunities for literacy that exist in children's play.

Not surprisingly, I end with a quote from John Dewey.

> "I don't know just what democracy means in detail in the whole range of concrete relations of human life – political, economic, cultural, domestic – at the present time. I make this humiliating confession the more readily because I suspect that nobody else knows what it means in full detail. But I am sure, however, that this problem is the one that demands the serious attention of educators at this time.
>
> What does democracy really mean? What would be its consequences in the complex life of the present? If we can answer those questions, then our next question will be: What direction shall we give to the work of the school so that the richness and fullness of the democratic way of life in all its scope may be promoted? The cooperative study of these questions is to my mind the present outstanding task of progressive education." (1991, 1937, 190)

References

Bracey, G.W. (2000). A short guide to standardized testing. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Foundation.

Cuffaro, H.K. (1995). Experimenting with the world: John Dewey and the early childhood classroom. NY: Teachers College Press.

Dewey, J. (1991/1937). The challenge of democracy to education. The Later Works,1925-1953. Vol.14:1935-1937. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1991/1939). Creative democracy – The task before us. The Later Works, 1925-1953. Vol.14:1935-1937. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1976/1901). As concerns the elementary school. The Middle Works, 1899-1924. Vol.1:1899-1901. Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1966). Democracy and education. NY: Free Press. (Originally published 1916).

Dewey, J. (1963). Experience and education. NY: Collier Books. (Originally published 1938).

Gratz, D.B. (2000). Fixing the race: State texts and student progress. Education Week. Vol. XIX (39), June 7, 2000, pp. 32, 34.

Meier, D. (2000). Educating a democracy. In Will standards save the public schools? Boston: Beacon Press.

Nash, G.B. (2000). Expert opinion. In Will standards save the public schools? Boston: Beacon Press.

Perrone, V. (September,1997). The Barbara Biber Lecture. NY: Bank Street College of Education.

Perrone, V. (1989). Working papers: Reflections on teachers, schools, and communities. NY: Teachers College Press.